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Interview of Keith Coleman

Keith Coleman

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Keith Coleman who has spent over 21 years in mission work in Germany was interviewed by Winfred Wright on June 5, 1970.

Wright: Keith, we are happy to have you with us today and have you share with us some of your ideas concerning mission work and to have you tell us about your part of the work in Germany. Would you begin by giving us a brief historical outline of the work in Germany and your part in it?

Coleman: Yes, I would be glad to. First, I would like to say that I am glad to see you again and happy to be on the campus of Harding College. I think that we could say that the work in Germany actually began with planning here in the States and with the work of men in the armed services who were in the occupation as well as the invasion forces in Germany. Brother Otis Gatewood and Roy Palmer were the first to get into Germany. I came in with the second wave of workers. I got into Germany late in 1948 and have been there most of the time since then with a very few visits back home. In this time we have had a concentration of workers at first in the Frankfurt area. Then it scattered out from there into other places. We had a school work for awhile in which we tried to train native workers. The work saw a real visible increase in the first years. In recent years we have not seen so much visible increase, but where there has been a visible increase we feel like it has been a more stable result.

Wright: What is the general religious background of the people with whom you work and how have you dealt specifically with the religious beliefs?

Coleman: Western Germany is about 50% Catholic and 50% Lutheran. Both of these churches are state churches. The people are very closely tied to these state churches traditionally, but the churches do not relate to their lives as we know churches for the most part here in the States. This has made our work very difficult because the people feel tied to these churches and yet at the same time they do not see that religion should relate to a person's life very much. They say oftentimes that people only go to church maybe four times--when they are infants and are christened, when they are confirmed, when they marry, and when they die. It is a very difficult situation for us to understand as Americans, and it is difficult to get these people out of these ways of thinking which are so traditional bound.

Wright: What is the general economic situation in Germany and how has this effected your work?

Coleman: Right now the economic situation in Germany is very good. In many ways it has effected our work adversely, I would say. When we first went there, people were grabbing for a straw. They realize that Hitler did not do what he promised. They were down on their back, and when people are that way they look up. We were able to help them physically and offer them hope spiritually, so they were more interested as a whole than they are now.

Wright: How would you define the German people culturally? What are some of the differences between them and Americans?

Coleman: I would say that the German people have a great cultural heritage that goes back hundreds of years. This gives them stability in some ways that we as Americans do not know. They have a great interest in the fine arts, in literature and language. They are conscious of the great historical events which have taken place in their country and in the countries round about them. They are very language conscious, much more so than Americans. They are people who are interested in their history and in current events. They are people who are conscious of their ancestry more than Americans are.

Wright: What are some of the serious challenges that you've had to overcome during these 21 years in Germany?

Coleman: I think the greatest challenge any of us has anywhere is the challenge of self, overcoming self, and trying to become all things to all men. Of course, we have our ways of thinking, and we don't get rid of these ways overnight. We try to get into the ways of thinking of the German people, understand why they act as they do. I think this is one of the most difficult things to do at all. Of course, we have to continually remind ourselves that we are supposed to love everyone and all people in spite of what they have done, what they do, and what they may do. I think it all sums up to a challenge of overcoming selfishness-that we need to love people and that we need to become all things to all men.

Wright: I am sure that you tried a lot of different methods and different approaches during these years. What methods have you found to be exceptionally effective?

Coleman: I don't know that I could say that any method has proved so effective. If it had, we would be converting a lot of people, I believe. I think that we can say that many of the methods that we use right here in the States, when adapted to the German scene, are very good. For example, just plain personal work, taking a real interest in those about us, yields great results there as compared to other methods just as they do here in the States. The German people are very interested in reading. We've had pretty good success with articles in the papers, tracts, and printed material.

Wright: Are the German people receptive to a door-to-door type personal work?

Coleman: I would not say that they are not receptive. On the other hand, I would not say that they are particularly receptive. One problem we've had in this sort of work is that so many people in Germany work, including wives, so a person may have to knock on quite a few doors before he finds very many people at home. Then, of course, people consider their homes to be a private sanctuary and many of them do not want an intrusion. If a person is very skillful, he can get into homes and talk to them. I think this is an effective way. It is a way that we need to try. I think we need to try every way that offers much hope of getting close to people and getting contact with them.

Wright: Looking at it from the other point of view, what methods have you tried that seem to be unworkable or ineffective?

Coleman: I don't recall just right now any methods that I would say do not work. I just think it is a relative matter. Some methods work better at some time than

others. For example, the use of tent meetings was at one time quite effective, and we could easily fill a tent without doing advertising. Now, we can hardly get a handfull out at a tent meeting in most of our large cities without considerable effort in advertising.

Wright: What special approach have you taken in Germany that might be more or less unique to your work there?

Coleman: Again, I don't know that I could say there is any special approach that I used in Germany that I would not use here in the States. I have tried to consider the mentality of the people and adapt the approaches to this mentality.

Wright: Have you had any participation in what we refer to as group work approach?

Coleman: Yes, I've had some experience. I think this is one effective way of working.

Wright: What about the training of the national Christians for carrying on their own work? What is your experience with this and what are your views concerning it?

Coleman: I feel very keenly about this point. I personally feel that we have not done what we should have done, and even have not done what we intended to do along this line. We've held back too much. We've been afraid to let the German people take hold and really take the ball so to speak and as a result we do not have the independent congregations that we should have in Germany. I think there has been a great trend in the last few years to better this situation. I feel that we have fallen down on this point.

Wright: How about the support of those that we do train? Do you think it is good to have them supported from America?

Coleman: My personal conviction is that it would be better for us not to support them from American funds. I've thought about this a great deal; I've watched it closely. I realize that at first we make a bigger impression by supporting native workers with American funds, but in the long run I believe we do more harm than good. I believe we get these people dependent upon us, and it is hard then to wean them away from this American support. I think many of the problems we have had in Germany has been a result of this. This is one reason that the German workers themselves have not wanted to make the congregations more independent I feel because they are thinking of this support unconsciously. I am not going to impute the motives of any of these workers, but it is just a natural human tendency I believe.

Wright: Would you feel somewhat the same way towards church buildings?

Coleman: I feel somewhat the same way toward church buildings. I think maybe we could be a little bit more lenient. I think a good method would at least be to have the native churches give considerable support if not all in building their own building.

Wright: Keith, you've been one of the few among us who have supported ourselves in mission work. Would you evaluate the role of a vocational missionary?

Coleman: Well, it is a thing a person is continually evaluating while he is in it and after he gets out of it. I think it is a great opportunity for the missionary to develop his own abilities and also to reach people. He gains the respect by becoming a vocational missionary that he oftentimes cannot gain if he is on support from the States. I heartily recommend it. Of course, I am thankful for every full time man that we have on the field. I am not encouraging full time people to get out of full time work if they are really trained for that and if they are happy and adjusted in it. At the same time there is a real need for more vocational missionaries.

Wright: What would be some specific areas of work in which Americans could engage in in Germany?

Coleman: There are a great number. There are so many American business firms in Germany and many of these firms have to have some American personnel. In at least one state in Germany they are to begin very soon employing American teachers to teach English in the schools. I think this would be an outstanding opportunity for our young people with some teaching experience and with a fair knowledge of German to help convert others to Christ.

Wright: Would there be any opportunity for Americans to teach other subjects in their school systems, either elementary, secondary or on the university level?

Coleman: I do not know of other opportunities, except on the university level. I've known of some cases of this being done. This would depend on the person's training, of course.

Wright: What suggestions would you make for someone planning to go to Germany in terms of preparation and training?

Coleman: Certainly, first would come his dedication to Christ. I think everyone of us should constantly be testing himself on this point: Why do I want to go to Germany? A person should test this perhaps in some practical ways here in the States--do some mission work here in the States to just test his own motives, his own dedication. Then I would say that a person should get all of the language study that is practical for him to get. He should also talk with those who have been on the field, to read a great deal about the history and culture of Germany. I think it would be a good idea for men planning to go to Germany to have a second line of work if possible that they can fall back upon. It gives a person a feeling of independence so that he can work more freely even in full time work.

Wright: What problems have you encountered in getting support and in keeping support during the time that you were supported by the church?

Coleman: I would say one of the problems in getting support is getting to know the congregation that the person is working with or would like to work with here in the States. Once you get a sponsoring congregation, I think the job is much easier. I would certainly say that once he gets well acquainted with this congregation, the congregation should get well acquainted with him. That will help him then in this second field of keeping support. Oftentimes a congregation gets discouraged when they do not see the results in Germany that they would see here in the States with a

worker. In keeping support, I think we need to realize that we have to keep the congregations constantly informed. I have known of a number of workers who have not informed their congregation as much as they should.

Wright: Have you noticed any particular trend in the United States as to support of European missions?

Coleman: I believe there are some trends that I have noticed in the years since I left Germany. One trend seems to be a very good one and that is to get to know the workers better so they can support them better. I feel too that the congregations as a whole are waking up to the fact that men in the foreign field need a good support just as they need them here. A man who does not have to worry about clothes and educating his children can do a more effective work than one who has to worry about these things. I personally am very pleased with the way their congregations are taking the matter of support and doing something on a more serious and practical standpoint.

Wright: How do you feel in general concerning the work in Germany? What is the future for it?

Coleman: I think the work in Germany is just as bright as the promises of God. He has told us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. It may be years before we see great visible results that we would like to see. We may never see them, but I personally would say that the prospects are very bright, and we have some very bright spots in the work over there. The brethren are constantly learning from one another, and we have some real dedicated men on the field, both German and American men.

Wright: What specific suggestions would you make for Christians in America, in the churches or our schools, for the improvement of the work in Europe?

Coleman: I would re-emphasize what I have already said and that is be sure that we know our motives, that we are truly dedicated to Christ, and, of course, we all need to work on this and become more dedicated to Him. I think that it is good for people to go over to Europe and see the work firsthand, even if a person goes over only for two or three weeks, I think every bit of knowledge that he can get will help him. It is better, of course, if a person can go over and stay several weeks. I appreciate the fact that elders are coming over to Europe more than they have ever done before, also young people in these campaigns. Then I think we need to encourage our missionaries in Europe to keep the churches back here informed with pictures, reports and visits.

Wright: Could you turn philosopher for a minute and just give us your general philosophy of missions?

Coleman: Well, I think I've already indicated the direction I have in my philosophy of missions, if we can call it that. I believe that our work is to preach the gospel, that God will give the increase. I believe that the Lord expects us to teach faithful men who will be able to teach others. I believe that He does not mean for us to be missionaries in one spot all of our lives, and to nurture one little church all of

its life. I think that He intends for us to reach out to as many people as possible. I think that this view of missions will not only help the missions work, but it will also help the missionary to develop himself more and also to go to other places and do a greater job.

Wright: Thank you for being with us today and taking time out to share with us many of your ideas. We appreciate so very much your long years of service in Germany, your faithfulness to the task there, and will be interested in your continued contribution to that mission field even though you will be living for awhile in the States.